Summary of
"Estimating the Need: Projecting from Point-in-Time to Annual Estimates of the Number of Homeless People in a Community and Using this Information to Plan for Permanent Supportive Housing"
Burt and Wilkins, Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2005
Summary Prepared by Michael Stephens, February 12, 2006

I. Summary

This paper gives recommendations for

1. Performing a point in time count of homeless individuals
2. Using data from the point in time count (or other data if a point in time count is not possible) to estimate the "annual levels of homelessness"
3. Using annual levels of homelessness combined with some other information to determine the need for permanent supportive housing

Recommendations for accurate point in time (PIT count)

- Adequate coverage
  - Those in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and "equivalents" (motels or hotels on "homeless" vouchers)
  - Those using services such as meal programs, outreach, drop-in, and health care
  - Those who have no contact with such services
- Avoid duplication
  - Count for a very short period, in limited locations
    - Assumption: People will not move around too much
    - Problem: Miss a lot of people
  - Solution: Expand time and place of count, use unique identifiers to avoid duplication
    - Use attributes such as name, age, gender
    - Must be able to create identifier for each person counted
- Authors suggest reading "A Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People" (Burt et al, 2004) for more a more detailed discussion of performing a PIT count.

Projecting Annual Estimates from PIT count

- When you have personal information
  - During PIT count, determine
    - When this spell of homelessness began
      - Within last 7 days?
      - If longer, did person come to this community within last 7 days?
    - Whether a previous homeless episode has occurred in past 12 months
    - Number of homeless children with the respondent
  - Annual estimate = $PIT_{total} + ((PIT_{last\ 7\ days} * 51) * (1 - PIT_{previous}/PIT_{total}))$
    - PIT_{total} = PIT count of currently homeless people

The authors concede that the paper is not intended to give detailed guidance on the counting issues of coverage and duplication, and recommend "A Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People (Burt, Turnham, and Wilson, 2004) for this purpose.

The formulas given in the paper for estimating annual levels of homelessness have the potential to be woefully misleading.

- The formula suggests multiplying the number of people who have become homeless or come to the community within the last 7 days by 51. However, this assumes a 1-day count. The appropriate multiplier would be (52 / ((N + 7) / 7)), where N is the number of days over which the count took place. For example, for a count lasting 7 days, there is one week's worth of people who have been homeless for at least a week, therefore the number should be multiplied by only (52 / ((7 + 7) / 7)) = 26. The authors concede that to get adequate "coverage", a count lasting longer than one day may be needed. Kentucky is given as an example of an area that has conducted counts over periods of six to eight weeks.
- The formula suggests multiplying by (1 – proportion who have had previous homeless within the past 12 months). This is an attempt to avoid overestimating by "double-counting" those with more than one spell. However this only avoids "double-counting" it does not avoid "triple-counting" or counting four of five times those people who have three or more homeless spells in one year. If there is a significant number of people who become homeless once per month, the potential for overestimation is great.
- The method for estimation does not take into account seasonal or cyclical patterns of homelessness. There may be a time of the month in which more people become homeless for a short period. If the count was not during this time, it could seriously under-estimate those who one or more brief periods of homelessness. (The potential to overestimate if the count is during this period also exists.) There may be certain times of the year where more people are homeless for a period of time; again, if the count did not take place during this period, it could seriously underestimate, or if it did take place during this period, it could overestimate.

For communities such as Long Beach where there are possibly thousands of people who are homeless at some point each year, the errors in the formulas given could cause the estimates to be inaccurate by one thousand or more.

The formulas for determining the need for permanent supportive housing seem appropriate, but are not a significant contribution to a solution for the problem. The difficulty lies not in coming up with the formula, but in deciding how to come up with the estimates of how many people within each group ("unsheltered", "in emergency housing", "in transitional housing") actually need permanent supportive housing. While such decisions must be made by each community for themselves, this paper does not offer guidelines for doing so beyond suggestions to use data from the PIT count and recommendations from emergency housing and transitional housing providers.

        - $PIT_{last\ 7\ days}$ = number of currently homeless people who became homeless within last 7 days or entered community within last 7 days
        - $PIT_{previous}$ = number of currently homeless people who have had a previous homeless episode within the past 12 months
        - Note: Remember to include children in each of these parameters
- When you have no personal information
    - Authors suggest using data from emergency shelter (number of people counted, average length of stay, number from count who have had more than one emergency shelter stay)

Corporation for Supportive Housing's (CSH) definition of Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH): "A combination of affordable housing and supportive services that are available for as long as they are needed."

To estimate need for PSH, more information is needed about those counted in PIT count to determine how many will not be able to end homelessness without PSH:

- Personal characteristics affecting need
    - Length of current homeless episode
    - Number of homeless episodes and their timing
    - Chronic disabling conditions
- Estimates made by providers in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing about the number of their residents who need permanent supportive housing

Authors suggest estimating unmet need in the following manner:
Unmet need =

Number of unsheltered homeless people estimated to need PSH
+ number of people likely to enter homelessness during coming year
+ number of people in emergency shelters at PIT count estimated to need PSH
+ number of people likely to enter emergency shelters during coming year
+ number of people in transitional housing likely to need PSH
- PSH units in development
- PSH units expected to become available due to turnover

Authors suggest separating estimates into singles and families due to different facilities needs

II. Analysis

This paper is not detailed enough to be useful for anything other than giving a general overview of the approach recommended by the Corporation for Supportive Housing for estimating the need for supportive housing.

The authors also fail to consider the economic impact of adding permanent supportive housing (PSH) units to the housing market. What will happen to the price of "free market" housing units? What will happen to the demand curve and quantity demanded for this housing? What will happen to the supply curve and the quantity supplied? It is possible that the addition of PSH units will reduce the price for other housing units, thus reducing the total need for PSH units. It is also possible that the addition of PSH units will cause the price of other units to increase, which could cause more people to become homeless and possibly need PSH. Either way, the affect on the estimated number of PSH units needed could be significant, possibly by a margin of one thousand or more units in a community the size of Long Beach.

III. Recommendations

- Further research may be needed in the following areas:
  - Methods for ensuring an accurate PIT count
  - Methods of estimating other information such as number of individuals who have an episode of homelessness in a year using PIT count data
  - Economic impact of adding PSH to housing market
- Develop criteria for determining whether or not a person or family "needs" permanent supportive housing, transitional housing, and/or other forms of support
- Invite social scientists and other data collection experts to sit on an advisory board to make recommendations for performing PIT counts of homeless people and to give guidelines regarding how the information from the count should be used. Avoid inviting individuals whose primary work involves advocacy for the homeless to ensure unbiased recommendations, so that the most accurate count possible is obtained and so that the interpretation of the results of the count is objective.